



## ‘We went through hell’: Former players accuse Cynthia Cooper-Dyke of demeaning, demoralizing and abusive behavior

Chantel Jennings and Dana... May 5, 2022

🗨️ 277 📖

*Content warning: This story contains graphic language of a sexual nature.*

On Jan. 20, around the midpoint of this past season, members of the Texas Southern women’s basketball team received an email from the university’s student conduct coordinator, Dontia S. Warmack, informing them that the school was instituting a limited-contact order between the players and their head coach, Cynthia Cooper-Dyke. That order stipulated that players could not have one-on-one meetings with Cooper-Dyke and could not communicate with her “via text, phone, social media or email” as the school conducted “a safety-risk assessment.”

Nearly a month later, on Feb. 16, Warmack, via email, elevated that order to no-contact and extended it to include assistant coaches Carlos Wilson and Atallah McKinney. It prohibited any “in-person contact, telephone calls, emails, texts, other forms of electronic communication, social media-based messaging or postings, and third-party communications, including communications through proxies.” Outside of practices and games, the coaches and players were to have no contact at all – coaches couldn’t even shag rebounds for players getting in extra shooting.

College basketball teams are, traditionally, close-knit operations. Coaches are surrogate parents at the best of places, looking after players, meeting with them regularly, helping them navigate their college experience. Yet at Texas Southern for the second half of the season, school officials took the extraordinary step of separating the paid leaders of the program from the women they were supposed to be leading.

Cooper-Dyke has led Texas Southern's women's program since April 2019 – she also coached there during the 2012-13 season – and there are few women who have meant more to women's basketball. She won two national titles as a player at USC (in 1983 and 1984), was a four-time Finals MVP of the Houston Comets dynasty that captured the first four [WNBA](#) titles (1997-2000), and won an Olympic gold medal in 1988. Last season, she made “[The W25](#)” team, a collection of the 25 greatest players in WNBA history.

Cooper overcame a tumultuous childhood and played with an underdog's tenacity. Her resilience and spirit enabled her to reach a level of recognition rarely afforded to female athletes. At Nike's headquarters in Beaverton, Ore., there is an outdoor complex named after her – “The Coop.” During All-Star weekend in Houston in 2006, Cooper [was photographed](#) with Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, Carmelo Anthony and Moses Malone. Jordan reportedly called her over to join the group for the photo – greatness recognizing greatness.

As she moved into coaching, going from the [Phoenix Mercury](#) to Prairie View A&M to UNC-Wilmington to Texas Southern to USC and then back to Texas Southern, player after player initially relished the opportunity to play for her. “I mean, she's the Michael Jordan of women's basketball,” one USC player says. “Of course we were all excited.”

Yet that woman and others would come to feel differently after being subjected to language and behavior that some players considered abusive, and several say they fell out of love with or quit the sport because of Cooper-Dyke's treatment.

At Texas Southern, Cooper-Dyke's alleged actions led to a Title IX investigation that prompted the no-contact order. Records of the investigation reviewed by *The Athletic* indicate that among the allegations probed by the school:

- When told that one of her players — who had a previously known mental health diagnosis — was depressed, Cooper-Dyke responded, “No, she will be all right, she just needs some dick, that's all.” Later she called that same player a “sorry-ass virgin.”

- Cooper-Dyke came up behind a player while she was doing squats and said, “Ooh, your hips are big, you got a fat ass and I can tell you like to ride some dick.”
- Cooper-Dyke repeatedly shamed a player for her weight in front of the team, and that player was so despondent she stopped eating in front of her coach.

Upon learning about the no-contact order, *The Athletic* began an investigation into Cooper-Dyke’s college coaching career and communicated with more than 25 individuals, including players and their family members and basketball staff members, most of whom witnessed alleged incidents first-hand. Many individuals requested anonymity due to Cooper-Dyke’s continued influence in women’s basketball or because they were limited by NDAs. *The Athletic* also reviewed written correspondence, phone records and video recordings and filed freedom of information requests in an effort to probe the claims. The investigation revealed broadly similar allegations that, for at least a decade, Cooper-Dyke routinely used overt sexual language with her players, in ways that many found to be inappropriate, demeaning and degrading. Among the allegations:

- At UNC-Wilmington, where she coached from 2010-12, Cooper-Dyke often talked about her own or players’ sex lives. For example, at one practice during the 2010-11 season, Cooper-Dyke said, “Wet, wet” after making a shot and then motioned to a player and said, “I bet that’s what (name redacted) was last night.”
- During her first stint at Texas Southern, in 2012-13, Cooper-Dyke got on her knees in front of a male assistant during practice and mimicked performing fellatio, and she told one player that her slow running during a drill was due to her “getting dicked down” all the time. She called some players “Black-ass child,” “bitch,” “pussy” and “dumbass.”
- At USC, where Cooper-Dyke coached from 2013-17, she also harped on some players’ sex lives and named one of the team’s plays “hot sex.” She called some players “retarded” and once mocked people with special needs. She also pressured some players to practice when they were injured or returning from an injury.

There were also allegations that she and her staff doled out excessive punishment that team members say endangered players’ physical and mental health. At UNC-Wilmington, one such punishment drill – log rolls up and down the court – caused a player to vomit repeatedly and some of the skin on her knees to rub off. At USC, one player felt so wronged by Cooper-Dyke after her punishment that the player repeatedly punched a bleacher until her hand bled while Cooper-Dyke watched.

Some of Cooper-Dyke's alleged actions were brought to the attention of school administrators at UNC-Wilmington and USC, and also Texas Southern long before the contact orders were issued earlier this year. But Cooper-Dyke moved on to new jobs, her career apparently unaffected. "Nobody has said anything or done anything, just passed her off to the next school," says one USC player. "This woman mentally and emotionally terrorized us."

On March 17, the second day of the 2022 women's NCAA Tournament, Cooper-Dyke, then 58, announced her retirement. Texas Southern vice president of intercollegiate athletics Kevin Granger said in a statement that Cooper-Dyke "has had a tremendous impact on TSU women's basketball since her arrival and moved the program to new heights. She will be missed and I wish her nothing but success in her future endeavors." It went unstated that Cooper-Dyke was scheduled for an April 6 Title IX hearing. Per Texas Southern policy, the university can dismiss a Title IX complaint if "the Respondent is no longer enrolled or employed by the University."

*The Athletic* made multiple attempts over the last week to obtain comment from Cooper-Dyke by telephone and text message. Details about the specific allegations made against her also were sent to her by email. On Wednesday evening, Cooper-Dyke texted: "Throughout my years as a coach, I've had countless interactions with players in my role as their coach, mentor and friend. I had positive relationships with the majority of players and staff, and my only intention was to maximize players' potential and help them be their best. While these allegations are untrue, everyone deserves to work, play and learn in a respectful environment, and I deeply apologize for and regret any words used during the course of a spirited game or practice that offended or hurt someone."

Texas Southern did not respond to specific questions about the status of the investigation or Cooper-Dyke. A spokesperson provided a statement that read: "Given the confidential nature of Title IX and personnel matters, the University is unable to comment. Please be assured that the University takes any issues that impact the safety and health of our students, faculty, and staff seriously to ensure a learning environment free from discrimination, harassment, and violence."

More and more female athletes are speaking out about the behavior of coaches, careful to delineate between those with a healthy approach and those who they believe crossed a line. The National Women's Soccer League faced a [reckoning](#) last year after a string of stories about coach misconduct and how teams acted or failed to act when they became aware of allegations. The issue came to the fore in [women's basketball](#) as well. But because of the longstanding



demographics in coaching, more often than not the accused are men. That Cooper-Dyke is a woman, and so revered in women's basketball, especially stung many of the athletes who shared stories about her behavior. Several say they had been waiting years for someone to contact them and scrutinize her actions and the schools that employed her.

“Every time something comes across my Instagram, someone celebrating her, I want to scream,” says Thaddesia Southall, who played for Cooper-Dyke at USC in 2013-14. “She does not stand for what the WNBA represents. She does not stand for what they are trying to promote. This is a woman who demeaned us, who talked to us like we were not human. She made me hate basketball, and no one did anything to stop her.”



Cynthia Cooper-Dyke at a game between the Philadelphia 76ers and the Los Angeles Lakers on March 23. (Adam Pantozzi / NBAE via Getty Images)

In her book, “She Got Game: My Personal Odyssey,” Cooper-Dyke details a sobering childhood that included financial struggles, an absentee father, the stabbing death of her beloved brother, Ricky, and a verbally abusive older brother, Kenneth. She also wrote of being sexually molested by a family friend. “Being violated like that leaves its mark,” she writes. “It makes you feel that you mean nothing to anyone. I was already self-conscious about a lot of things – myself, my body, my clothing, who I was, what I represented – including the fact that we were poor. But this experience was worse than all those feelings combined.”

After starring at USC, Cooper-Dyke played overseas from 1986 to 1996 and in the WNBA from its inaugural season in 1997 through 2000, and again in 2003. She coached for one and a half seasons with the Phoenix Mercury (2001–02), [abruptly resigning](#) about 90 minutes [before a game](#), citing family reasons. Cooper-Dyke and her husband, Brian, had twins born via surrogate 11 days prior.

Cooper-Dyke’s first college job came in 2005 at Prairie View A&M, an HBCU just 47 miles from Houston and one that had not known much success. She was hired by Charles McClelland, who would hire her again at Houston-based Texas Southern seven years later.

By her second season at Prairie View, Cooper-Dyke led the Panthers to their first NCAA Tournament bid. *The Athletic* attempted to contact players from her time there but only one, Valencia Higgins, responded to an interview request. Higgins says Cooper-Dyke infused a professional atmosphere into the program, and that Cooper-Dyke allowed players to have fun, but when it was time to play basketball it was serious. “She was a professional basketball player. We ran our system like how a WNBA team probably would run their system,” Higgins said. “For a lot of us, and myself, it was something extremely new.”

Cooper-Dyke’s time there did not, however, come without controversy. An NCAA investigation in January 2008 found “major violations” under her watch, which included giving small amounts of cash to players. Though the NCAA attributed the violations to her lack of familiarity with college rules, the program was placed on four years’ probation and lost three scholarships.

In spring 2010, UNC-Wilmington was looking for a new head coach. During the interview process, athletic director Kelly Mehrrens asked Julia Finlay, who was going to be a junior, to be among the players asked to sit in on the interviews. Finlay grew up watching Cooper-Dyke win WNBA titles and gasped when the coach walked into the room. In two months’ time, Cooper-Dyke would be the first WNBA player inducted into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame.

When the interview ended, Finlay and her teammate turned to Mehrrens and practically begged the athletic director to hire Cooper-Dyke. “My mom and my aunt both played basketball and I called them up and I was like, ‘Cynthia Cooper is going to be our coach!’” Finlay says.

In some of her first practices at UNC-Wilmington, Cooper-Dyke began using language that the players felt was inappropriate. *The Athletic* spoke with four players from UNC-Wilmington; Finlay was the only one willing to be named.

Three players from Cooper-Dyke’s first team said that they initially took her vulgar or sexual remarks as an effort to relate to the younger players. But the language became more graphic, more specific, and they began to feel as if she was speaking in that way to degrade and humiliate them.

Once, when the team was in the vicinity of the UNC-Wilmington men’s team, two players said that Cooper-Dyke pointed to a player on the men’s team and asked a female player: “Are you fucking him? Are you riding him?” The comment she made after making a shot and saying “wet, wet” – “I bet that’s what (name redacted) was last night” – was made at a different practice, two players said. One player said that during a road trip Cooper-Dyke talked with her about sex. “This wasn’t a productive conversation, where you’re trying to make sure young women are taking care of themselves,” she says. “This was inappropriate.”

It was not merely the sexualized language that disturbed the players. One player says that Cooper-Dyke mocked her physical appearance “frequently enough that it made me not want to be around.” That player added: “It was like the mean girl, but 20 years later.”

Finlay idolized Cooper-Dyke, but she quickly fell out of favor with her new coach. She finished a preseason mile test 30 seconds faster than Cooper-Dyke demanded; the coach had cautioned players to pace themselves. Finlay expected to be praised for her effort. Instead, the coach was upset she didn’t listen. As workouts continued, Finlay felt Cooper-Dyke was singling her out.

During one practice, exasperated from feeling nitpicked, Finlay threw her hands up in frustration, she says, and Cooper-Dyke threw her out of the gym. When Finlay later went to the coach’s office to apologize, Cooper-Dyke brushed her off, and Finlay thought the matter was settled. But when she showed up at practice the next day, Cooper-Dyke told her that she could not rejoin the team until she completed a punishment workout. Later, in a meeting in Cooper-Dyke’s office, Finlay says that the coach told her that she was considering revoking her scholarship. Finlay begged for another chance. “I still didn’t know what I did wrong, but I’m begging her,” Finlay says. Cooper-Dyke agreed to give her another chance but, Finlay says, the coach told her she

would design a punishment drill specially for her because running her wouldn't work; she was too strong a runner.

The next day, while Cooper-Dyke was on a recruiting trip, assistant coach Johnetta Hayes instructed Finlay to do log rolls the entire 94 feet of the court over and over. Finlay says she vomited in garbage cans on the side of the court and on herself, and after rolling for 20 minutes, the skin on her knees and shoulders began to scrape off.

Brian Mull, a reporter for the Wilmington Star-News, was sitting in the upper level of the arena, preparing to watch the men's practice. "Every time (Finlay) stood up, she looked like someone who had been on a boat, like she was seasick," Mull says. Mull [reported on the incident](#) in the newspaper. "I've been to hundreds of practices, mostly men," Mull says. "I've seen guys get in fistfights, guys get thrown out of practice. Seen them run for punishment but I've never seen anything like this. I kept thinking, 'This isn't right. What could she have done?'"

UNC-Wilmington denied a request for records of any subsequent investigation, but Mull says he and his executive editor took part in a teleconference with then-chancellor Rosemary DePaolo. Finlay met with Mehrtens and DePaolo. She says she told both administrators of Cooper-Dyke's comment that she would come up with a unique drill to punish Finlay. At the conclusion of the investigation, per a school release, Hayes was disciplined for her actions but, citing university policy, it did not detail the discipline. (Hayes, via a spokesperson at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, where she is currently the head women's basketball coach, declined comment.)

In [an interview](#) with Mull, Cooper-Dyke called the assigned workout a "bad choice," and said she opted not to run Finlay for the punishment drill because of a foot injury. Finlay says that she never missed a practice or workout because of the injury and was capable of running.

Mehrtens, the athletic director, said in a press release that Cooper-Dyke "remains committed to running our program with the utmost character." Mehrtens [resigned on Sept. 27](#), seven days after the incident. DePaolo said Mehrtens' departure was not related to the investigation into the punishment drill.

At a team meeting later, Cooper-Dyke lamented that "everyone is out to get me," and she sobbed and asked for a group hug, according to three people present. Finlay took part in the hug despite her negative feelings toward the coach.



Later, Cooper-Dyke held a team meeting at her house, to which Finlay was not invited. Two of Finlay's teammates, who were present at the meeting, said players who supported Cooper-Dyke and the coach herself put them to a choice: "They were all like, you have to choose between Julia and basically this team," says one player, who counted herself as one of Finlay's friends. "She was the problem. It was all Julia, Julia, Julia." More than a decade later, her voice chokes as she remembers how she and other players turned on Finlay, siding with Cooper-Dyke. "Man, I still wish I could make this right. I always said I would not make my parents pay for college, so whatever happened with basketball at that point, I just knew I had to keep my scholarship. They made it seem like I had to choose. I felt, I still feel, so guilty about that."

Finlay [quit the team](#) that October, leaving before the season started. "I was extremely suicidal at that point," she says. "All I wanted was to play basketball and to have her like me. She's my hero." Twelve years later, Finlay, who is a new mom, says she still thinks about what happened to her. "It's how she manipulated me into losing all of my confidence. She broke me down to the point that I accepted that, and thought it was my fault."

Cooper-Dyke coached UNC-Wilmington for two seasons, twice leading the Seahawks to the WNIT, including their first postseason appearance. During those two years, the inappropriate language continued, the four players say, the talk about sex, the disrespect, the belittlement. She called out one player in front of her teammates for failing a class. (Typically, college coaches address academic matters only in private.)

In April 2012, Cooper-Dyke resigned to become the head coach at Texas Southern. At the time, UNC-Wilmington athletic director Jimmy Bass said the school was in the middle of its annual review of Cooper-Dyke, but he had granted permission to Texas Southern to interview her. In the basketball hierarchy, Texas Southern was a step down, but Cooper-Dyke said she wanted to go home to Houston and relished the chance to work again with McClelland, who hired her at Prairie View A&M and was Texas Southern's athletic director. "I love the city of Wilmington, the UNCW student body and all of the coaches and student-athletes have been awesome," she told The Star-News. "Of course my players have been the best as well, so it was a very tough decision."

Finlay was home in New York when she heard Cooper-Dyke was moving on to a new job. She says: "There's a quote I think of when I think of her. 'If you don't transform trauma, you will transmit it.'"

At Texas Southern in 2012, Cooper-Dyke was once again met by a starstruck team, young women eager to be taught by a legend. And again, some of those players were quickly disillusioned.

Cooper-Dyke keyed in on forward Morgan Simmons' relationship with her boyfriend. "I would be dancing to certain songs and she would be like, 'you probably don't even know how to ride that dick' or 'you don't know what to do with the dick,'" Simmons says. When Simmons was slow during morning sprints one day, Cooper-Dyke yelled in front of the team and men's players who were working out nearby, "If you weren't getting dicked down all the time, if you weren't on dick or whatever, you would be making times," Simmons says, "and I'm just like, why would you say that? Like why are you so interested in my sex life?"

Two other Texas Southern players say they witnessed those and other incidents. In all, *The Athletic* spoke to four players from Cooper-Dyke's first stint at Texas Southern, with only Simmons agreeing to be identified.

The players all recalled that Cooper-Dyke routinely used lewd language or discussed sex in ways that they felt was degrading and inappropriate. For example, during stretching ahead of practice one day, Simmons and another player say that Cooper-Dyke announced to the team that she had spoken with Simmons' boyfriend in the weight room earlier that day and that he had told Cooper-Dyke that Simmons didn't know what she was doing "in the bedroom."

During one early-morning practice, Simmons and two other players say Cooper-Dyke knelt in front of one of the male assistant coaches and pretended to give him fellatio. The assistant had been complaining that with early practices he hadn't had much of a social life. "She proceeds to get in front of him on her knees and pretty much act like she's giving him oral sex," one player says. (The assistant did not respond to requests for comment.)

Simmons and two other teammates say Cooper-Dyke sometimes called players "dumbass," "pussy" or "bitch." Once, the coach told a player that if she didn't beat a teammate on the next sprint, "We're going to have a real problem, you Black-ass child." Cooper-Dyke referred to her in that way on multiple occasions, which she took as commentary on the fact she is dark-skinned. Simmons and another player say that while at a Thanksgiving tournament in the Bahamas, Cooper-Dyke turned to athletic director McClelland and, in front of the team, asked him if she could send a player "home on a boat." This comment felt especially demeaning to the player, a daughter of Haitian immigrants.

McClelland confirmed that he was on that trip but said “I do not recall that.”

“We say to this day, like, we feel like we went through hell,” added a Texas Southern player from the 2012-13 team. “We talked to each other through everything. ... At that point, it was just like, forget this basketball stuff, let’s protect each other’s sanity.”

Despite the tumult, Texas Southern finished the season 20-13 and earned a bid to the WNIT. That caught the eye of USC and, at the end of the 2012-13 season, Cooper-Dyke returned to her alma mater.

McClelland says during that season there were no allegations of misconduct reported to him and that he never witnessed anything untoward within the program.

“If you can leave Texas Southern and go to USC, what better publicity do I have to bring in a coach than to tell them that?” McClelland told the Houston Chronicle at the time. “Cynthia left us in real good shape to continue our goals.”



USC head coach Cynthia Cooper-Dyke talks to her team during a game in December 2013. (Jeff Golden / Getty Images)

In her book, Cooper-Dyke writes about her love/hate relationship with USC. Though she was proud to have attended the university that sat just eight miles and yet a world away from her Watts neighborhood, she struggled with self-consciousness. Keenly aware of the wealth of some of her classmates, she waffled between relishing her underdog role and being ashamed of her upbringing.

On the court, she struggled playing sidekick to Cheryl Miller. Cooper-Dyke even left school briefly on the heels of the Trojans' 1984 title, but she returned a year later for her final season. That year, Cooper-Dyke doubled her point production and led USC back to the title game. Though they were beaten by Texas, Cooper-Dyke was named to the Final Four all-tournament team alongside Miller. Cooper-Dyke did not get her degree at USC – she completed it while

coaching Prairie View A&M – but ranks eighth on the all-time scoring list, fifth in assists and third in steals.

Bringing back a beloved Trojans star seemed like a natural fit, and it was celebrated that way. “In Cynthia Cooper-Dyke, we have a proven winning coach, who happened to be a USC basketball icon,” athletic director Pat Haden said at the time.

Like at Prairie View A&M, UNC-Wilmington and Texas Southern, players were excited, and for reasons beyond her fame. “Nothing against (Cooper-Dyke’s predecessor) Michael Cooper, we also were excited to have a woman as a coach. Men, just you know sometimes, they don’t relate to women the same way,” says one player, whose first pair of basketball sneakers were the Nike Air C14, Cooper-Dyke’s shoes.

“That (excitement) lasted maybe two weeks,” says another person associated with the program.

Thaddesia Southall was, like Cooper, once a prized local prospect, a forward from Long Beach Poly. But by the time Cooper-Dyke arrived at Heritage Hall, Southall was a senior academically but had missed two full seasons because of serious knee injuries – in 2012-13 she had surgery after her body rejected a ligament graft to repair her ACL. Going into the 2013-14 season, doctors had her on a methodical plan to return to action, but Cooper-Dyke insisted she return to practice in violation of the doctors’ orders, Southall says, and threw her out of some workouts and practices, telling her if she couldn’t go hard she had no use being there.

On Oct. 19, 2013, Southall says she returned to practice despite swelling on her knee and a doctor’s order to take four days off. Unable to compete, she subbed out of a drill and removed her brace. Her knee was visibly swollen, Southall says, but Cooper-Dyke insisted she return to the drill. Southall explained to her coach that she could barely bend her knee, but Cooper-Dyke threw her out of practice, telling her she was off the team.

Southall says she called senior women’s administrator Donna Heinel and told her what had happened. A few hours later, Southall says Heinel called her back and informed Southall that she supported Cooper-Dyke’s decision to kick Southall off the team for what was termed a violation of team rules. “Basically (Cooper-Dyke) said that since I couldn’t practice, I was violating the team rules,” Southall says.

Southall reached out to athletic director Pat Haden, but Haden told her to meet with Heinel, who oversaw the women’s team. Southall says she then met with Heinel in her office, explaining



how she'd been mistreated. But Heinel reaffirmed her support for Cooper-Dyke's decision.

Thaddeus Southall, Thaddesia's father, said via text that he also spoke with Heinel and Cooper-Dyke over the phone about his daughter's dismissal – even telling Cooper-Dyke they crossed paths in 1984 when he played with her cousin at Long Beach City College. Thaddeus Southall says Cooper-Dyke would not reverse her decision.

On Nov. 12 of that year, Southall's mother, Letitia Williams, says she FedExed a nine-page letter to Haden detailing her daughter's situation, including the allegations that Cooper-Dyke made her practice while injured. The letter, which *The Athletic* reviewed, reads, in part, "I expected that when my child left this university, that she would leave a proud young lady with honor and her head held high. I did not expect to have to rebuild her myself after being torn down mentally along the way." Williams later met with Haden in his office, she says, and he told her that he would not "interfere" with Cooper-Dyke's decisions. Southall also met with Haden in his office around that time, she says, and he urged her to find the positives in the situation. "He said they were going to pay for my final year of tuition, and they would support my release, and he got me my jersey," Southall says.

Southall played at Long Beach State as a grad student in 2014-15, and she earned her master's degree. She now works at Spelman College as an adviser. "Nobody believed me," she says, adding that she is speaking only of the former administrators. "They thought I was just lazy or weak because that's what she said. This is a superstar, a legend. Of course they believed what she said."

Heinel pled guilty to one count of honest services wire fraud for her part in the Varsity Blues admissions scandal and is currently awaiting sentencing. Her attorney, Nina Marino, said: "We deny any suggestions that Dr. Heinel did not take proper action."

In addition to Southall, *The Athletic* interviewed three other players and one staff member regarding Cooper-Dyke's behavior as a coach at USC, all of whom requested anonymity. All of those interviewed recalled that Cooper-Dyke frequently used overt sexual language that they found inappropriate and demeaning to players. For example, two players recall Cooper-Dyke remarking to a player who fell to her knees while coming off a screen: "Oof, I hear that's where you stay a lot." A staff member and two players say that Cooper called one play "hot sex."

Southall and four people within the program also say they witnessed Cooper-Dyke mocking the intelligence of players who failed to understand a drill or execute it properly, sometimes calling them "retarded." In one instance, according to three players, Cooper-Dyke beat her chest and

changed her voice to mimic a person with special needs and screamed, “Look at these fucking retards I’m coaching.”

In her book, Cooper-Dyke writes of a run-in with a coach when she played professionally in Italy. He didn’t take kindly to Cooper-Dyke’s incessant need for information. “‘Shut up,’ he would shout, his voice rising for impact. ‘SHUT UP!’” Cooper-Dyke wrote. She confronted him, thinking he didn’t understand the negative tone of the wording. Instead, he used it again and when she sassed back at him, he sometimes threw her out of practice.

At USC, players recalled that Cooper-Dyke similarly sometimes responded to questions from players or her assistant coaches with “shut the fuck up.” In the middle of some games, she sometimes shouted them down with lines such as: “Do you think you’re smarter than me?” One person in the basketball program recalled an incident at a game at Fresno State in 2013 in which Cooper-Dyke yelled at one player: “You think you’re better than me? Oh, come over here and I’ll show you.”

“I couldn’t believe that this was our coach,” says another USC player. “She was the only Black female head coach at USC at the time and our team was majority Black young ladies, we felt that you should be holding that position with honor, with professionalism, with prestige. ... You should approach the sport with so much more dignity.”

In one practice during the 2013-14 season, two players say Cooper-Dyke became upset that a third player wasn’t performing defensive slides well enough, so she made the player do them for several minutes nonstop, until the player finally said she couldn’t continue. They say that Cooper-Dyke then ordered the player to run while her teammates watched. The player “was crying, bawling,” says one of the players, while Cooper-Dyke yelled, “This is what happens when you’re fucking retarded.” When the player finished running, she went over to the wooden bleachers on the side of the gym and punched them repeatedly, bloodying her knuckles. “We could hear the rat, rat, rat,” the player says. “She’s actually causing herself harm.” Eventually, a few players ran over and stopped her.

“Cynthia just stood there,” the player says. “She didn’t say shit.”

Says one person within the program: “I was a mess and not a day went by that I didn’t think about taking my life and even had an idea to do it at Cynthia’s house so she could understand what a devastating impact she had on me.”

In addition to Southall, another player says she met with Heinel in her office during Cooper-Dyke's first season, 2013-14, explaining that she felt like a "punching bag," singled out for everything from how she played to her appearance. The player says Heinel replied, "I don't believe that's how it happened." The player says she next met with Haden and reiterated her concerns. Haden referred her back to Heinel.

A spokesperson for Haden emailed that "(Haden) has no recollection of being informed about allegations of serious misconduct involving the women's basketball coach, including the alleged use of crude language or any form of abuse toward student-athletes or coaches. If he had been made aware of them, Mr. Haden would have taken immediate corrective action."

Not long after she went to Heinel and Haden, the player says Cooper-Dyke made it clear she knew people had complained about her. A different player says that Cooper-Dyke joked about players who decided to "run and tell the feds." Another person associated with the program recalls Cooper-Dyke saying facetiously, "Oh, no, I never say anything inappropriate." Her cavaliness made players feel even more powerless.

"At one point, I wrote a letter about all of this shit," one former USC player says. "I wasn't ever going to do anything with it. How could I? She's Cynthia Cooper. She's goated — the GOAT. And I'm me." (The player never sent the letter to anyone, she says.)

The same player who met with Heinel during the 2013-14 season says she also met with her the following season and in 2016-17, again complaining about Cooper-Dyke's behavior. She says Heinel took no action.

Finally, later in the 2016-17 season, the player took her concerns to newly appointed athletic director Lynn Swann. She says she described to Swann the "toxic atmosphere" that permeated the program and explained that freshmen players were crying in the locker room even before practice started. The player says that after she informed Swann about Cooper-Dyke's behavior, Heinel became a regular visitor to practice.

Marino, Heinel's attorney, confirmed that Heinel attended practices after that meeting, writing: "When Coach Cynthia Cooper-Dyke's inappropriate behavior was reported to Dr. Heinel, she immediately conducted an investigation. Based on that investigation, Dr. Heinel wrote up Coach Cooper for using sexually explicit language and behavior. ... Based on Dr. Heinel's evaluations, Dr. Heinel recommended that Coach Cooper-Dyke be fired, even though she had a year left on

her contract. Coach Cooper-Dyke resigned when faced with termination based on Dr. Heinel's recommendation."

In the USC press release announcing Cooper-Dyke's resignation, the coach is quoted as saying, "What is best right now is that I step aside as the women's basketball coach and let someone else lead this team." Swann said in the statement: "We thank Cynthia for her dedication, hard work and service, and we wish her the very best. She is a great Trojan and will always be a valued member of the Trojan family."

Cooper-Dyke returned to Houston and did radio for Texas Southern in 2017-18. In April 2019, the school rehired her as its coach, with then-university president Austin A. Lane lauding Cooper-Dyke for her "mentoring of young women on campus and around the city of Houston."

*The Athletic* spoke to five players, three parents of players and one basketball staff member about Cooper-Dyke's behavior at Texas Southern, each of whom requested anonymity. All asserted that Cooper-Dyke again exhibited the inappropriate behavior she had at previous stops, using sexual innuendo when asked even the most mundane question. The staff member said that it was commonplace for Cooper-Dyke to respond to a mild question like, "How are you?" by referencing her sexual exploits. She also again named a play "hot sex" at Texas Southern, according to two players.

"She would talk to us like we were murderers in jail if you know what I mean," one player says. "I've never had a coach that's cussed at me like she did or said some of the things she would say."

Cooper-Dyke continued to be combative with players and assistants. "Oh, you think you know everything? This is my shit," one player recalls her screaming after the player asked to clarify how a play was being run. During one practice during the 2021-22 season, a player says Cooper-Dyke told one staffer who made a suggestion: "Get the fuck out of my gym, go home. You're a sorry-ass bitch. You're a nobody."

Three Texas Southern players said she forced them to practice or play even though doctors had not yet cleared them for contact. "I had to do this drill, and she knew I wasn't supposed to," one player says. "I kept looking at her like, 'Are you going to stop this?' And she was like, 'C'mon, c'mon. Let's go. Are you lazy?' I felt like I had to do it."

More than a year ago, on April 1, 2021, the mother of one player says that she detailed some of the mental abuse suffered by her daughter and others in a phone call with Kevin Granger, Texas Southern's vice president of intercollegiate athletics. (*The Athletic* reviewed an email to Granger requesting the call; the parent's phone records show a 19-minute phone call later that day with Granger's office line.) The parent says Granger dismissed her concerns as gripes borne out of a lack of playing time for her daughter. (Granger did not respond to multiple emails requesting comment.)

The discord and the discontent finally reached a peak at the start of this year, when the parent of a player wrote an email to Texas Southern president Lesia Crumpton-Young, and two players went to Bobby Brown, the Title IX officer. That prompted the investigation and the limited contact and eventual no-contact orders. When a Texas Southern spokesperson was asked why assistant coaches Carlos Wilson and Atallah McKinney were added to the order, she responded: "It is TSU's policy to not comment on personnel issues."

A divide emerged within the team between those who supported Cooper-Dyke and those who felt she had done wrong. In a text exchange viewed by *The Athletic*, one staffer wrote to a parent that Cooper-Dyke was pressing players for information and "that ruins the integrity of the investigation." As stated in a document related to the Title IX investigation, one player threatened her teammates. "Did y'all send emails out? 'Cause, I'm telling you right now we're going to find out who is doing this to her and beat someone's ass," she yelled.

In March, two people say Cooper-Dyke and a staffer shouted at one another while riding with the players on the bus to the SWAC Tournament; the staffer was complaining to Cooper-Dyke about her treatment of the staff.

"I can't take this anymore," one player told her mother in a phone call after the bus trip.

On March 11, Brown, the Title IX officer, sent out emails requesting the appearance of witnesses "on behalf of Complainants vs. Cynthia Cooper," scheduling a Zoom hearing for April 6.

On March 17, the school announced Cooper-Dyke's retirement in a laudatory press release. A short time later, the mother of one player received a text message from Brown, the Title IX coordinator, that read: "Hello, Texas Southern University's Office of Title IX (OTIX) is notifying witnesses that the Title IX administrative hearing scheduled for April 6, 2022 at 10 a.m. in the matter of Title IX Coordinator vs Cynthia Cooper is cancelled."



Says one Texas Southern player from this past season: “Excuse my language but that was just total bullshit. After everything that happened with us, you’re just going to let it go like that? But that’s how it is. All anyone cares about is that name.”

*(Top photo: Richard Shiro / Associated Press)*

### What did you think of this story?



MEH



SOLID



AWESOME

---

National

Boxing

Bundesliga

Champions League

College Football

Culture

EFL

Europa League

Fantasy Baseball

Fantasy Basketball

Fantasy Football

Fantasy Hockey

Fantasy Premier League

Gaming

Golf

International Soccer

La Liga

LNH

Men's College Basketball

Mixed Martial Arts

MLB

MLS

Motorsports  
NBA  
NFL  
NHL  
NWSL  
Olympics  
Premier League  
Scottish Premiership  
Serie A  
Sports Betting  
Sports Business  
UK Women's Football  
WNBA  
Women's College Basketball  
The Athletic Ink  
Podcasts  
Headlines  
Real Time  
The Athletic UK

US

Arizona  
Atlanta  
Baltimore  
Bay Area  
Boston  
Buffalo  
Carolina  
Chicago  
Cincinnati  
Cleveland  
Columbus  
Dallas  
Denver  
Detroit  
Houston  
Indiana  
Jacksonville  
Kansas City  
Las Vegas  
Los Angeles

-  
[Memphis](#)

[Miami](#)

[Minnesota](#)

[Nashville](#)

[New Orleans](#)

[New York](#)

[Oklahoma](#)

[Oregon](#)

[Orlando](#)

[Philadelphia](#)

[Pittsburgh](#)

[Sacramento](#)

[San Antonio](#)

[San Diego](#)

[Seattle](#)

[St. Louis](#)

[Tampa Bay](#)

[Utah](#)

[Washington DC](#)

[Wisconsin](#)

[Canada](#)

[Calgary](#)

[Edmonton](#)

[Montreal](#)

[Montréal \(français\)](#)

[Ottawa](#)

[Toronto](#)

[Vancouver](#)

[Winnipeg](#)

[Share](#)

[Buy a Gift](#)

[Invite Friends](#)

[HQ](#)

[Careers](#)

[Code of Conduct](#)

[Business Inquiries](#)

[Press Inquiries](#)

-